

Founders of Our Living Faiths

SRI RAMAKRISHNA

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Sri Ramakrishna

Introduction

A saint is one who has risen above all conflicts, who lives at peace with himself and the world, and who by so living promotes the unity of mankind. One such great saint was Sri Ramakrishna whose advent took place in the nineteenth century at a time when India was passing through a crisis of her soul. Foreign rule had not only reduced the people of India to a state of abject poverty, but had also made the English-educated classes look upon Indian culture with contempt and a sense of shame. Even some of the reformers looked down on Hindu tradition and religious practices. Image-worship, for instance, was condemned. The Hindu scriptures were considered to be completely out of step with the march of modern knowledge. It was at such a time that Sri Ramakrishna appeared and proved that Hinduism was as valid in the modern age as it had been in the past. By practising the different spiritual exercises and by following the several modes of approach to Godhead, he showed that all the religious paths were helpful, and that all led to the experience of unity and peace.

The story of Sri Ramakrishna is a saga of God-intoxicated life. One of his biographers, Romain Rolland, aptly describes Sri Ramakrishna as "the consummation

of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people". Sri Ramakrishna lived in this world only for fifty years; but into that half-a-century was packed the most intense spirituality. He had no formal education, and was a priest by profession; but the most mighty intellects of his time went to him for wisdom; one of the best fruits of Western education, Narendranath Datta who later came to be known as Swami Vivekananda, became his willing disciple and apostle.

Birth and Early Life

Kamarpukur is a small village in the district of Hooghly in West Bengal. There lived in that village a pious Brahmin family, whose head Khudiram Chattopadhyaya was known for his moral uprightness and scrupulous honesty. His ancestral home was in another village, Dereypore. A tyrannical landlord of that village had asked Khudiram to give false evidence in a court case. Khudiram had refused to oblige him. And so, he had to migrate to Kamarpukur where he was given asylum by a friend of his boyhood days. When he went to this new village to begin life afresh, the family consisted of himself, his wife Chandramani, a son and a daughter. With the land-gift of half an acre, and with his unflinching devotion to the family Deity Raghuvir, Khudiram lived peacefully in his new habitation. His spiritual exercises became more and more intense, and he was respected by all in the village for his devotion and straightforward conduct. About ten years after his taking residence in Kamarpukur, Khudiram went on a pilgrimage to Ramesvaram and had a son born to him, who was named Ramesvara after the presiding deity of the holy place.

Another pilgrimage in 1835 took Khudiram to Varanasi and Gaya.

On 18 February 1836, Chandramani gave birth to a boy, remarkable for his beauty and size. He was as big as a six months old child. The child was named Gadadhar one of the appellations of Vishnu. It was Gadadhar who later on came to be known as Sri Ramakrishna.

Gadadhar grew up under the fostering care of his ageing parents. The child was not only the light of the home where he was born; he was the darling of the entire village. Gadadhar had attentive memory. He would repeat songs and stories after listening to them only once. He was put to school when he was five years old. He showed normal progress in his studies, but had no liking for arithmetic. He would play with his school-mates, sing and dance; his deft hands were skilled in clay-modelling and painting; he was an expert in mimicry without the least touch of malice.

The first occasion when he lost outward consciousness was when he was a boy of six or seven. Recalling this incident later in life, Sri Ramakrishna said, "One morning I took some parched rice in a small basket and was eating it while I walked along the narrow ridges of the rice fields. In one part of the sky, a beautiful black cloud appeared, heavy with rain. I was watching it and eating the rice. Very soon, the cloud covered almost the whole sky. And then a flock of cranes came flying. They were as white as milk against that black cloud. It was so beautiful that I became absorbed in the sight. Then I lost consciousness of everything outward. I fell down and the rice was scattered over the field. Some people saw this, and came and carried me home."

As this was the first time he lost outward consciousness, the parents were alarmed. But really there was no cause for getting perturbed. Gadadhar was sensitive to the sublime, and such experience was to become his normal state later on. A tragic event that occurred soon after—the death of his father in 1843—made the boy turn Godward all the more. Khudiram was sixty-eight then. The pain of separation from her pious husband was terrible for Chandramani to bear. Gadadhar was too young; but yet he also felt the loss of his father keenly. He sought solitude frequently and spent considerable time in contemplation. He used to visit the rest-house in the village where the pilgrim sadhus halted on their way to Puri. He attended on them, served them, and joined them in their meditations. Sometimes he returned home with ashes smeared all over his body after the manner of the sadhus. When the mother became apprehensive and gave expression to her anxiety, Gadadhar assured her that he would not leave her. About this time Gadadhar had a second experience of losing consciousness. One day he accompanied some of the women of the village to Anur, about two miles north of Kamarpukur. The party was going there to worship at the temple of Visalakshi. On the way, the boy was asked to sing, as the women loved to hear his voice. Gadadhar sang but suddenly he became dumb his body turned stiff, and tears rolled down from his eyes. One Prasanna, the leader of the group, knew that Gadadhar was a divine child; she made the entire party utter the name of Mother Visalakhi. And in a

short while, Gadadhar returned to normal consciousness — none the worse either physically or mentally for the strange experience.

At the age of nine, Gadadhar went through the ceremony of *upanayana*; investiture with the sacred thread is symbolic of the second or spiritual birth. After the ceremony is over the boy has to beg his food—as boys in ancient days living in the house of their preceptor had to live on alms. Dhani, the daughter of the village blacksmith who had helped Chandramani at the time of Gadadhar's birth and who was her neighbour and friend, had asked the boy that when his *upanayana* came to be performed he should beg the first alms from her. And the boy had promised to do so. Now, Gadadhar remembered the promise and insisted that he should keep it. But to ask alms of a woman belonging to a lower caste was against the rule; and Ramkumar, the eldest brother, would not permit it. Gadadhar, however, was determined to keep his promise. He put a pertinent question to Ramkumar to which the latter had no answer; "One who deviates from truth, has he any right to wear the sacred thread of a Brahmin?" Gadadhar had his way, and Dhani had the privilege of becoming his "alms-mother".

After his *upanayana* Gadadhar undertook the daily worship of the family deity Raghuvir. With the passing of each day the worship became all-absorbing. To the boy, Raghuvir was very much alive, the lord of his heart and soul. Gadadhar would spend long hours in contem-

plation and meditation. He was no longer a frolicsome boy; he became more and more indrawn, and disinclined even to study at school.

About this time, another misfortune overtook the family. Ramkumar's wife died leaving an infant son behind. Ramkumar found it increasingly difficult to run the household with a diminishing income. He decided at last to go to Calcutta and start a Sanskrit school there. In Calcutta, besides teaching Sanskrit, he undertook to officiate as priest in the households of pious people. During the next three years he paid occasional visits to Kamarpukur. Although he was pleased with Gadadhar's devotional nature, he was depressed by the utter lack of progress in his studies. So, he decided with his mother's consent, to take Gadadhar with him to Calcutta and look after his studies and also make him assist in his priestly duties.

So Gadadhar went to Calcutta. But even here he showed no interest in his studies. "I have no use," said he, "for the kind of education that only enables one to make a living. What I want to acquire is the knowledge which will give me spiritual insight." The other assignment, *i.e.* officiating as a priest in households, however, pleased him. The families to which his services were made available liked him immensely for his sincerity and earnestness. Ramkumar's attempt to make the school pay ended in failure and he was thinking of closing it soon. The events took a turn which made the two brothers stay on in Calcutta, and led ultimately to the young priest Gadadhar flowering into the Saint Ramakrishna.

Early days at Dakshineswar

There was in Calcutta a rich and generous lady named Rani Rasmani. In 1848, she decided to go to Varanasi on a pilgrimage. But, on the night before her intended departure, the goddess Kali appeared to her in a dream and said, "There is no need for you to go to Varanasi. Build for me a temple in Calcutta on the bank of the Ganges."

The Rani immediately purchased twenty acres of land about four miles north of Calcutta alongside the river at Dakshineswar. With the active help of her son-in-law Mathur Mohan, she built a group of temples on the side which was converted into a beautiful temple-garden. Temples were constructed to house Mother Kali as Bhavatarini, twelve Siva-Lingas, and Krishna as Radhakanta. Guest houses and pillared halls, were added as also a music tower, a discourse-hall, a flight of steps leading down to the river, terraces, and paved courtyards. Rasmani spared no pains to make the new temple-place worthy of the Divine Mother. She had a fine image of the Mother carved and kept it safely in a box awaiting the day of consecration. May 31, 1855 was fixed as the auspicious date for the installation ceremony. The Rani succeeded in persuading Ramkumar to officiate at the ceremony of installation and also to accept temporarily the office of priest at the

Kali Temple. The Goddess Bhavatarini was installed in the new temple on the appointed day, as also the other images. Gadadhar was present in the temple



Rani Rasmani

during the ceremony. Ramkumar decided to assume permanent charge of the worship of Kali. He wound up his school and settled down in Dakshineswar. Gadadhar stayed with him and assisted him in his priestly duties.

Gadadhar was, at first unwilling to accept appointment as a priest in the temple. Mathur Mohan, Rani Rasmani's son-in-law, was keen on having him as an assistant to his brother Ramkumar, but this spiritually charged youth was averse to this proposal. About this



Mathur Mohan

time Hriday Mukhopadhyaya, a nephew of Gadadhar's arrived at Dakshineswar in search of employment. He was four years younger than Gadadhar, and the two were good friends from their boyhood days. When Hriday came to Dakshineswar and heard of Gadadhar's

disinclination to serve as a priest, he could not understand the reason. When questioned, Gadadhar told him that he disliked serving as a paid priest and that he was not prepared to take charge of the ornaments and other property. Hriday offered to assume this responsibility and Gadadhar was to help in dressing the image of the Goddess and offering worship. Thus, both Gadadhar and Hriday were appointed assistants to Ramkumar in the temple of Kali. This arrangement pleased Mathur Mohan and the Rani greatly and Hriday spent the next twenty five years at Dakshineswar as Gadadhar's companion.

Soon after Gadadhar entered on his duties, an incident happened in the temple which made the young priest rise greatly in the esteem of Rani Rasmani and her son-in-law. It was the day after the Janmashtami (Sri Krishna Jayanti). After worship, the priest of the Radhakanta Shrine, one Kshetranath, was carrying the image of Sri Krishna to the retiring room. He tripped, the image fell on the floor; and as a result one of its legs got broken. The Rani did not know what to do. The *pandits* who were consulted gave it as their opinion that the broken image should be consigned to the Ganges, and a new one made and installed. Mathur Mohan, however, found this verdict very painful to execute and he sought the young priest's advice. Gadadhar went into an ecstatic mood, and said: "If one of the Rani's sons-in-law were to break a leg, what would she do? Would she throw him away and take someone else in his place? Wouldn't she rather have him treated by a doctor? Let the same thing be done here. Let the image be mended and worshipped as before." The Rani and

Mathur were delighted. The task of mending was assigned to Gadadhar himself. He performed it so skilfully that no one could discern the crack in the image. Gadadhar was entrusted with the duty of offering worship at Radhakanta's Shrine. This was his first assignment as a full priest.

Ramkumar wanted to prepare his younger brother, Gadadhar, to undertake the worship of Divine Mother. For this a special initiation into the Sakti cult was necessary. Gadadhar, on receiving the initiation, fell into *samadhi*, to the amazement of all those who were present there, including the preceptor himself. Ramkumar made Gadadhar perform the worship of Kali, himself officiating as the priest at Radhakanta Shrine. The Rani and Mathur were delighted at this arrangement. It was a joy to watch the "Junior priest" perform the worship of the Divine Mother.

Ramkumar was feeling the burden of age and wanted to visit his home at Kamarpukur. But before proceeding there, he took ill suddenly and passed away.

Divine Mother's Child

Ramakrishna (thus we shall call Gadadhar henceforth) was deeply moved, for his brother had been his guardian since the death of his father. His detachment from the world became more intense. He gave himself up to worship and meditation. The jungle adjoining the temple became his favourite resort. He would go there unseen by others and spend long hours in meditation.

With the passage of time, Ramakrishna's devotion to the Mother grew ever more profound. His worship was not a formality, and did not adhere to the usual time-table. Every single act he performed—decorating the Goddess, offering her food, arati—revealed his conviction that the Divine Presence was more real than the objects or persons around. In fact, for him nothing other than the Divine Mother was real. For hours together he would sit before the Deity in deep absorption, put flowers on himself instead of on the image, offer her food and perform the *arati* for a long long time. Some who watched him thought he was mad. Mathur Mohan, however, was sure that Ramakrishna's devotion was the truest possible. He told the Rani that it was their good luck to have such a devout priest serving in the temple. The temple was surcharged with

the living presence of the Divine Mother. At the call of her beloved child, she had come to dwell in Dakshineswar.

Ramakrishna's divine hunger became insatiable. His sole desire now was to *see* the Mother. At the end of each day he would cry : "O Mother, another day has gone, and I have not seen you. You showed yourself to Ramprasad and other devotees in the past. Why don't you show yourself to me ?" At last, his prayers were granted. Ramakrishna described the experience later to his disciples thus : "There was a severe pain in my heart, because I could not get a vision of the Mother. I felt as if my heart was being wrung out like a wet towel. It was an excruciating pain. I became desperate, and was dying to see the Mother. In my agony I said to myself, 'What is the use of living this life ?' Suddenly my eyes fell on the sword that hangs in the temple. I rushed towards it and seized it like a mad person. And then I had a marvellous vision of the Mother and fell unconscious. It was as if everything—houses, doors, temples—vanished altogether; as if there was nothing anywhere. And what I experienced was a vast shoreless sea of light; a sea that was consciousness. I saw the waters of this sea closing in upon me and engulfing me. And I lost consciousness."

After this experience, Ramakrishna had frequent visions of the Mother. He felt her smiling, talking, consoling, and teaching him. The Mother was no longer confined to the image. He saw her everywhere—in himself, in men and animals, even in women of ill-fame, and in inanimate objects. Everything became big,

and pure, and sacred with the Mother Divine. Dakshineswar became her playground, and Ramakrishna her child.

One day, the Rani visited the temple and requested Ramakrishna to sing some songs in praise of the Divine Mother. Ramakrishna began singing. Then suddenly he stopped, turned to the Rani, and gave her a slap in the face exclaiming : "Shame on you to think such thoughts even here." Immediately there was consternation among the Rani's attendants, and they called out for help. But the Rani restrained them saying "He is not to blame; leave him alone. It was the Divine Mother herself who punished me and brought light to my heart." Instead of listening to the song, her mind had begun thinking of a lawsuit in which she was involved.

It was now becoming more and more difficult for Ramakrishna to perform the routine worship in the temple. Hriday thought that his uncle's condition called for medical treatment, and accordingly arranged for it. But this produced no effect at all. Ramakrishna undertook other types of spiritual *sadhana*s and these came to him as if by a pre-ordained plan. Rama as Raghuvir had been his family Deity. For Ramakrishna there was no distinction between one manifestation of God and another. Feeling a strong urge to worship God as Rama, he adopted the attitude of Hanuman and behaved like the faithful servant of the Lord. Simulation plays an essential part in *bhakti*. Ramakrishna, during the present *sadhana*, imitated Hanuman in every respect. This phase of his experience he recalled later on thus : "I spent a lot of time on trees; and

I kept crying 'Rama' in a deep voice. My eyes got a restless look, like the eyes of a monkey."

At the end of this *sadhana*, Ramakrishna had a glorious vision of Sita, the consort of Rama. He was sitting in the place which later came to be the Panchavati (a grove of five trees) in the temple garden. He was not meditating on Sita or even thinking about her. All of a sudden, he saw a luminous figure of exquisite grace approaching. He experienced this vision in broad daylight, with open eyes. As he was wondering who this might be, a monkey uttered a cry and jumped over to her side and sat by her. Then he knew in a flash that it was Sita. Then, Ramakrishna fell unconscious on the ground.

Marriage and Return to Dakshineswar

The news of Ramakrishna's divine madness reached his native village, Kamarpukur. His mother Chandramani and surviving brother Rameshvar were greatly distressed. Chandramani wrote to her son repeatedly urging him to go over to Kamarpukur for a change. Ramakrishna obeyed the call and went to his village. There was, however, no change in his mental state. He spent long hours in meditation, choosing one of the two cremation-grounds for the purpose. Chandramani sent for a local exorcist to cure her son; but his efforts were of no avail. Other methods were tried with similar results. At last, Chandramani and Rameshvar decided that Ramakrishna should get married. After frantic efforts a bride was found. She was Sarādamani, the only daughter of Ramchandra Mukherji of Jayaram-bati. The alliance was settled and the marriage ceremony was solemnised in May 1859.

Towards the close of 1860, Ramakrishna went back to Dakshineswar to resume his temple duties and the worship of Mother Kali.

The marriage had done nothing to lessen the intensity of Ramakrishna's divine madness. Back in the

temple of the Divine Mother, his ardour for *sadhana* grew further. Although for the first few days he performed the formal worship, it became again impossible for him to be tied down to a routine. Mathur arranged for medical treatment by one Kaviraj after another. But they declared that Ramakrishna suffered from no disease, his spiritual condition was not to be cured by medicine.

What Ramakrishna was passing through during this period he described in these words later on : "In this whirlwind, the sacred thread was blown off ; even the *dhoti* could hardly remain.....The idea of caste lost all meaning for me.....Sometimes I would share my food with a dog. My hair became matted. Birds would perch on my head and peck at the grains of rice which had lodged there during the worship. Snakes would crawl over my motionless body. I had no idea of time or of the body."

Mathur Mohan never wavered in his devotion to Ramakrishna. He recognized in Ramakrishna a divinely inspired soul. To Mathur, Ramakrishna appeared as Kali and Siva.

A short while after Ramakrishna's return from Kamarpukur, Rani Rasmani took ill, and she passed away on February 20, 1861. After the Rani's death, Mathur became the sole executor of her estate. He deemed service to Ramakrishna as his only aim in life. He used to tell Ramakrishna, "Everything is yours; I am only your steward."

The Coming of the Bhairavi

One morning, Ramakrishna was gathering flowers in the garden of Dakshineswar, when he saw a country-boat berthing at the bathing *ghat* near the temple. A woman in saffron robes got out of the boat carrying a bundle of books and a couple of garments which seemed to constitute all her earthly possessions. Ramakrishna, on seeing her, asked Hriday to meet her and bring her over.

The woman was a wandering nun, a Bhairavi devoted to the worship of the Divine Mother. She was well versed in the shastras and skilled in *Tantrik sadhana*. She was in her late thirties and glowing with spirituality.

At the very first meeting, the Bhairavi was convinced that Ramakrishna was *mahapurusha* (a great soul). Ramakrishna in his child-like manner told her how people regarded his spiritual condition as madness. The Bhairavi assured him that his state marked the culmination of *bhakti* and was the same as that experienced by Radha and Sri Chaitanya.

Later in the day, the Bhairavi went to Panchavati, cooked food-offering for the image of Raghuvira (Sri Rama) which she was carrying with her, and placing the food before the image sat in deep meditation. Soon after



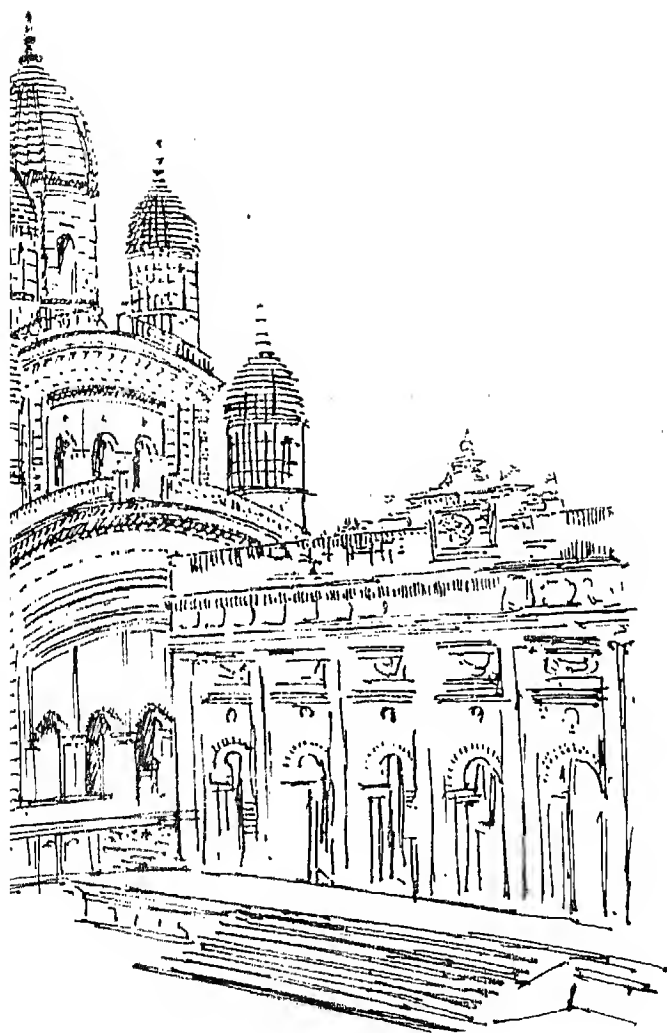
Panchavati

this, Ramakrishna entered Panchavati in an exalted mood, sat there and began to eat the food that was kept before the image of Raghuvirā. When subsequently both Ramakrishna and the Bhairavi returned to normal consciousness, Ramakrishna was apologetic while the Bhairavi was overjoyed. She said; "You did the right thing, my son". It was not you who ate the food but the one who is within you. My worship has been accepted by my God. 'There is no longer any need for external worship.' So saying, she reverently partook of the food left over by Ramakrishna. Later she consigned the image of Raghuvirā to the holy waters of the Ganges.

Tantrik and other Sadhanas

With the Bhairavi as his guide, Ramakrishna practised *Tantrik-sadhana*. The disciplines comprising this *sadhana* are difficult and dangerous. Ramakrishna himself had at first some doubts whether he should take to them or not. Finally, he decided in favour of the practices after obtaining the Divine Mother's permission. The Bhairavi was an adept and she gave him all the necessary instruction. What would ordinarily take a long time to achieve, Ramakrishna achieved after a very brief period of practice, usually in three days' time. As a result of *Tantrik-sadhana* he had myriads of mystic visions of Gods and Goddesses. The most fascinating vision was that of Rajarajeswari or Tripura, the Supreme Mother adored in Tantra-shastra.

Ramakrishna's *Tantrik-sadhana* lasted from 1861 to 1863. Among the many ascetic visitors to Dakshineswar during this period there was one *sadhu* called Jatadhari. It was about the year 1864 A.D., when this wandering monk, a Vaishnava devotee, came to Dakshineswar. He was a worshipper of Rama. He worshipped Rama as the child Ramlala. It was verily Ramachandra, the darling of Kausalya when he adored. Ramakrishna was attracted towards this particular mode of devotion. He participated most intensely in the worship of Rama as child. Jatadhari was at first depressed, but eventually



Dakshineswar

he was happy. One day, he went up to Ramakrishna and said, "Ramlala has revealed himself to me. He doesn't want to leave you and is happy with you. I too am happy. I shall leave him with you and depart, knowing that he is with you." Jatadhari gave the image of Ramlala to Ramakrishna, and went away.

In 1863, Ramakrishna's mother Chandramani came to Dakshineswar, and thereafter she dwelt there for the rest of her life. Mathur Mohan, who used to address Ramakrishna as "Father", was glad of the opportunity to look after his master's mother whom he called "Granny". Chandramani lived in one of the two *Nahabats* (music-towers), very near Ramakrishna's room. Her last years were spent in peace and serenity. Her end came in February 1876.

Advaita Sadhana

What is known as Advaita Vedanta is not really a school of thought : it stands for the plenary experience of non-duality as declared in the *mahavakya* 'That thou art' (*at tuam asi*). When the time had come for Ramakrishna to have this highest experience—towards the end of 1865—there arrived at Dakshineswar a wandering monk Tota Puri, belonging to one of the ten monastic orders founded by Sankara. The monk hailed from Punjab, and had joined the order as a child. When Tota Puri reached Dakshineswar, he spotted out Ramakrishna who was at the time sitting in an obscure corner of the portico of the temple ghat. Without standing on ceremony, he bluntly asked Ramakrishna if he would like to practise Advaita *sadhana*. Ramakrishna quietly replied saying : "I really don't know; it all depends on Mother." Ramakrishna went into the shrine of Kali; and returning a little later, he told Tota Puri, with evident joy, that the Mother told him : "It is to teach you that the monk has come here".

Tota Puri was charmed by the childlike nature of Ramakrishna. He found in Ramakrishna an ideal candidate for Advaita experience. Before Ramakrishna could enter the path that led to non-duality, he had to

be initiated as a sannyasin-disciple. After formally administering the vow of renunciation to one who was a born renunciate, Tota Puri explained to him the truth of Advaita, and taught him the method of realizing it. The mind had to be withdrawn from all objects, and fixed in the Atman; it had to go beyond name and form. Inward—turning was mere child's play to Ramakrishna. But he could not take his mind away from the Divine Mother. After some practice Ramakrishna went into *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the state of realization where there are no mental modes, and no distinction between the knower and the known. For three days Ramakrishna remained in this state of *samadhi* and had to be drawn out of it by Tota Puri singing the mantra, *Hari Om* in a loud voice. Tota Puri was so pleased that he continued to stay at Dakshineswar for many months breaking the rule that an ascetic should not stay more than three nights at a single place. As a result of his contact with Ramakrishna he realized how helpful *saguna* worship was to the seeker after Advaita experience. He could now see that there was no conflict between God-devotion and Self-knowledge.

For six months Ramakrishna remained in the state of *nirvikalpa samadhi*. He knew nothing of this world or of his body. He had to be physically shaken and some little food had to be thrust into his mouth occasionally to keep him alive. At the end of the six month period he had a vision of the Divine Mother who told him that he had a mission to fulfil and so he was to

remain for the rest of his life in the state of *bhavamukha*, aware of the outer world but seeing it as a mere appearance.

“Alien” Paths

For Advaita there is no religion that could really be called “alien”, for all religions lead to the same goal. After having gained the Advaita experience, Ramakrishna wished to tread the paths of Islam and Christianity and so demonstrate the harmony of religions. It was to the Mother that he prayed to show him how people professing other faiths worshipped Her.

Towards the end of 1866, there came to Dakshinewar a Sufi mystic, Govinda Rai, who had embraced Islam. Ramakrishna was attracted to this devoted follower of Sufism who at his request initiated him in the *sadhana* of that cult. As was his wont, Ramakrishna plunged himself heart and soul into the practice of the Islamic discipline. Later on, he described in the following words the mode by which he had the Islamic realization : “I used to repeat the name of Allah, wear my cloth in the fashion of the Mohammedans, and recite the *Namaz* regularly. All Hindu ideas being wholly banished from the mind, not only did I not salute the Hindu Gods, but I had no inclination even to visit them.” Ramakrishna had a vision first of a radiant person with a long beard, and then a realization of the formless with attributes which led in its turn to a merger in Brahman without attributes.

Sometime later Ramakrishna turned to Jesus Christ and the Bible. One Sambhu Charan Mallik of Calcutta owned a garden close to the Dakshineswar Temple. Mallik was a keen student of the scriptures of the different religions. Ramakrishna used to visit his garden house, and sometimes listen to readings from the Bible. Mallik also acquainted Ramakrishna with the story of Jesus. In the parlour of the garden house were hung pictures of holy personalities. One of those pictures was of Virgin Mary with the child Jesus sitting on her lap. One day, as Ramakrishna sat looking at this picture, the figures of the Mother and the Child became luminous and rays of light emanating from them streamed forth and entered his heart. Ramakrishna was swept into the experience of Christ. He saw in a vision a Christian chapel and the divine service being offered by the priests. He went back to the Dakshineswar Temple in that mood of absorption in Jesus Christ, and remained in the same state for three days. On the fourth day, as he was walking in the Panchavati, he saw a tall bright figure approaching him. A voice from within told him that the figure was that of Jesus Christ, the Master-Yogi. As Ramakrishna stood in amazement, the figure of Jesus embraced him and disappeared into him.

Of the Buddha, Jina Mahavira, Guru Nanak, and other leaders of religion, Ramakrishna held the same view. All of them are incarnations; they appeared in the world at different times to guide humanity.

The Holy Mother

Sometime after the Advaita realization, Ramakrishna had an attack of dysentery, and even after the cure he was feeling very weak. Mathur Mohan decided to send him to Kamarpukur for a short change. Sometime in May 1867, Ramakrishna went to his native village and stayed there for a few months. Word was sent to Jayarambati about the arrival of Ramakrishna in Kamarpukur, and Saradamani was brought to be with him and attend on him. Sarada was then a girl of fourteen, and was meeting her husband for the first time after their marriage. She found in Ramakrishna the manifestation of pure spirituality; in his presence she felt elevated to the highest spiritual plane. Ramakrishna trained her for her future role as the Holy Mother of an ever-widening spiritual family.

The quiet atmosphere of Kamarpukur and the loving devotion of Sarada restored Ramakrishna to normal health. And he returned to Dakshineswar in December, 1867.

Mathur Mohan was planning a pilgrimage of Northwest India, along with his wife, other members of his family, and a large retinue of servants. He wished very much that Ramakrishna should accompany the party. The Master agreed and it was arranged that

Hriday should also go with him on the pilgrimage. In January 1868, the pilgrimage started. The first place of halt was Deoghur where the holy shrine of Sri Vaidyanath is situated. On the way they passed a village and



Saradamani

Ramakrishna saw that people there lived in dire poverty. Ramakrishna's heart was wrung with agony. He said to Mathur Mohan : "You are the steward of the Divine Mother. Feed these people and give each

one a piece of cloth." Mathur was at first hesitant because the pilgrimage was going to cost a lot of money. But he fulfilled the Master's wish and then the pilgrimage was resumed.

Varanasi was the next place of sojourn. Ramakrishna felt that the Holy City was "a condensed mass of spirituality." Almost daily, he visited the Temple of Vishwanatha, and those of Visalakshi and Annapurna. He also met the great saint Trailinga Swami. After about a week's stay at Varanasi, the party went to Prayag, and thence to Brindavan and Mathura. Ramakrishna was almost all the time lost in spiritual ecstasy during the visits to sacred places associated with Sri Krishna and his divine sport. At Brindavan, he met a noted Vaishnava devotee, Ganga Mata. On the return journey, the pilgrim party halted again at Varanasi for some time, and from there returned to Calcutta in the middle of 1868. In 1870, Ramakrishna made another short pilgrimage along with Mathur and Hriday. This time it was to Nadia, the birth place of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Not long after this trip, Mathur Mohan passed away in Calcutta after a brief illness; it was in July 1871.

It will be remembered that Saradamani was with Ramakrishna in 1867 during the latter's visit to Kamarpukur. After Ramakrishna's departure from the village, Sarada went back to Jayarambati. Since then she had not met her husband. It was now 1872. So, she was eager to go to Dakshineswar and see him. For the festival of Dol Purnima, some distant relatives residing in the village of Jayarambati were planning a visit

to Calcutta. Sarada asked her father for permission to accompany them. But he himself took the responsibility of taking his daughter there. On the way, Sarada was taken ill with fever brought on by fatigue. When they reached Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna received them with the due solicitude. When he heard that Sarada had fever on the way and saw that she was not yet free from its ill-effects, he arranged for a bed for her in his own room and nursed her back to health. After three or four days, when she had regained her health, she was accommodated in the music tower where Chandramani, her mother-in-law lived.

Sarada Devi had, at last, come to her lord, and she became his first disciple. In Sarada, Ramakrishna saw the Divine Mother manifested. She was the Holy Mother. One day, while Sarada was massaging Ramakrishna's feet, she asked him, "How do you think of me?" And he answered: "The same Mother who is worshipped in the temple, and the same Mother who gave birth to me and is now living in the music-tower—that same Mother is massaging my feet at the moment. I always see you as a visible form of the blissful Divine Mother."

The Master and his Mission

For about seventeen years now Ramakrishna had been living at Dakshineswar. Many seekers and God-intoxicated souls had gone to Dakshineswar from time to time, helping Ramakrishna and receiving help from him. The fame of Ramakrishna spread to nearby Calcutta, where discerning persons recognized in him a Paramahansa (Great sage).

Calcutta was at the time in the vanguard of the reform movement. English education and Christian missionary activity had made the young minds turn away from their ancient heritage. Swami Vivekananda, himself, a product of the new education, who became Ramakrishna's greatest disciple, has given a graphic account of what this education was doing at the time; "The child is taken to school, and the first thing he learns is that his father is a fool, the second that his grand-father is a lunatic, and the third that all his teachers are hypocrites, the fourth, that all the sacred books are lies. By the time he is sixteen, he is a mass of negation, lifeless and homeless."

It was in such an atmosphere that the leaders of reform began to appear. The Brahmo Samaj had already been founded by Raja Rammohun Roy. It deprecated image-worship and stressed the monotheis-



Ramakrishna in Keshab Chandra Sen's House

tic trend in Hinduism to the exclusion of all other aspects. Eight years after Raminohun's death, Devendranath Tagore took over the leadership of the Brahmo Samaj, then the most influential organization in Bengal. A large number of Ramakrishna's followers and disciples were to be drawn from the Brahmo Samaj.

Ramakrishna had met Devendranath Tagore some years earlier. Mathur Mohan and Tagore had been classmates at the Hindu College in Calcutta. Of greater significance was the meeting between Ramakrishna and Keshab Chandra Sen, the young Brahmo leader who broke away from Devendranath and founded the Brahmo Samaj of India in 1868. It was in March 1875 that Ramakrishna felt a call to go and visit Keshab. Accompanied by Hriday he went one day to the garden-house in Belgharia where Keshab was engaged in *sadhana*, along with his disciples. At the first look, Keshab and his followers were not impressed. But when they saw the saint go effortlessly into samadhi and when they beheld the soul-moving smile of dazzling innocence and sweetness on his face, they were fascinated and drawn towards him even without their knowing. Keshab became an ardent devotee; he and his disciples used to visit Ramakrishna quite frequently; and the saint also went sometimes to their meetings. Once Ramakrishna said to the Brahmo leader playfully, "Keshab, you delight so many people with your lectures—please expound something to me too." To which Keshab replied, "Sir, am I to sell needles in a blacksmith's shop?"

Among the other great men of his time that Ramakrishna met were Swami Dayananda, the founder of

Arya Samaj, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Michael Madhusudan Dutt. The one, however, who was most responsible in making Ramakrishna known through his writings and speeches was Keshab Chandra Sen. It was by reading about Ramakrishna in Keshab's journal that Balaram Bose, for instance, was attracted to the saint and became a staunch devotee. Mahendra Nath Gupta, better known as Master Mahasaya or M, was a Brahmo and was the headmaster of the Vidyasagar High School at Shyam-bazar. When he went to Dakshineswar and saw and heard Ramakrishna, he was at once captivated. He made it a point to record the Master's conversations, and also introduced to him several of his students and relatives whose lives thereby became transformed. Among the other householder disciples, mention may be made of Girish Chandra Ghosh, a great dramatist and the founder of the Bengali stage. When he read an account of the Paramahansa in the *Indian Mirror*, Girish was sceptical and doubted if he was a genuine saint. But when he became acquainted with the Master, his attitude changed completely. He became a devotee and his life was gradually transformed.

Some of the younger men who, falling under the spell of Ramakrishna, became his spiritual children and the torch-bearers of his message were Rakhal Chandra Ghosh (Swami Brahmananda) who later became the first President of the Ramakrishna Mission, Tarak Nath Ghoshal (Swami Shivananda) who succeeded Swami Brahmananda as President of the Mission, Sharat Chandra Chakravarty (Swami Saradananda) and Shashibhushan Chakravarti (Swami Ramakrishnananda)

both leading members of the Mission founded by Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda).

Narendranath was the son of a successful attorney-at-law in Calcutta. A member of the Brahmo Samaj, he took an active part in Keshab's devotional meetings, but this did not satisfy his soul's hunger. One day at college his teacher, Principal Hastie, while explaining Wordsworth's experience described in his *Excursion* said : "I have seen only one person who has experienced that blessed state of mind, and he is Ramakrishna Paramahansa of Dakshineswar." Narendranath was then eighteen, and was preparing for his First Arts examination. In November 1880, he saw Ramakrishna in the house of a friend, Surendranath Mitra. Narendra had sung a beautiful hymn on that occasion. Subsequently Narendra went to Dakshineswar. He put the saint a straight question, "Sir, have you seen



Swami Vivekananda

God ?" The Master replied, "I see Him just as I see you

before me. Only I see Him much more clearly, and I can show Him to you." These words carried firm conviction to the young seeker; his questing soul had now found a safe port. Narendra's visits to Dakshineswar became more and more frequent.

Ramakrishna asked Narendra to read the Advaita texts. Narendranath was to become a world teacher with a universal message; it was Advaita that could carry the truth of harmony to a world at war with itself. And it was in the spirit of Advaita that Narendra as Swami Vivekananda later appealed to the religious leaders assembled at the Chicago Parliament of Religions.

Sri Ramakrishna was thus surrounded by a devoted group of disciples with Narendra as their chief. During his last illness the Master brought them close to one another as members of a spiritual brotherhood subject to monastic discipline. It was in the middle of 1885 that the Master showed the first-symptom of a throat trouble which developed into cancer and proved fatal. To facilitate treatment, he was at first lodged in a house at Shyampukur, and subsequently removed to a spacious garden-house at Cassipore, midway between Dakshineswar and Calcutta. The young disciples, with Narendra as their head, came to live in this house with the Master in order to be able to serve him. Day and night, they attended on him by turns. Sarada Devi became the Mother of this household; she served the Master and the boys who had now become her spiritual sons.

The Master prepared the children for their future life of dedicated service to humanity. Narendra would gather together his comrades, whenever there was time and engage them in spiritual study and conversation. The Master gave to the boys minute instructions in the details of monastic life. As he knew the end was nearing, he himself initiated them one day, as monks, and consecrated Narendra as the Head of the Order.

The end came on August 16, 1886. The disciples were disconsolate. To them the Master had been more than a parent. But when they recalled his teachings, they realized that he was present in their hearts.

The story of Ramakrishna's life is, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face. No one can read the story of his life without being convinced that God alone is real and that all else is an illusion ... In this age of scepticism Ramakrishna presents an example of a bright and living faith which gives solace to thousands of men and women who would otherwise have remained without spiritual light."

Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on the harmony of religions may be summarized in his own words :

"I have practised all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God towards whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths."

"The tank has several ghats. At one Hindus draw water in pitchers and call it *jal*; at another Mohammedans draw water in leathern bottles and call it *pani*; at

a third Christians, and call it *water*. Can we imagine that the water is not *jal*, but only *pani* or water? How absurd ! The substance is one under different names, and everyone is seeking the same substance.

“Every religion of the world is one such ghat. Go direct with a sincere and earnest heart to any of these Ghats, and you will reach the water of Eternal Bliss. But say not that your religion is better than that of another.

“Different creeds are but different paths to reach the one God. Diverse are the ways that lead to the temple of Mother Kali at Kalighat in Calcutta. Similarly, various are the paths that take men to the house of the Lord. Every religion is nothing but one of such paths.

“Advaita is the last word in realization. It is something to be felt in *samadhi*, for it transcends mind and speech”.

Sri Ramakrishna often conveyed his teachings through stories whose point anyone could understand. Some of these stories are given below :

Learn Before you Start Teaching

A Brahmin once went to a king and said, “O King, I am learned in the Shastras. Make me your *guru*. I will instruct you in the *Bhagavata*.”

The king said, “I should indeed love to study the *Bhagavata*. But I do not think that you are learned enough to teach me that holy book. Master it first yourself and then come and give me instruction.”

The Brahmin was disappointed. But he went back and read the *Bhagavata* again. Then he went to the king. The king again turned him away saying his knowledge was still imperfect.

This time the Brahmin absorbed himself completely in the study of the sacred books. He pondered deeply over every utterance and tried to find its hidden meaning. By the time he finished his study the teaching of the *Bhagavata* had entered his mind. The vanity of the world and worldly things had become clear to him and he no longer had any desire to become a king's tutor.

After a few days the king came to him and said, "Now I see, O Brahmin, that you have mastered the teaching of the *Bhagavata*. I am willing to be your pupil if you will agree to teach me."

Go On And On

Once a poor woodcutter while cutting wood in the forest came across a mendicant. The mendicant watched him for some time and said, "If you go farther on into the forest you will gain much."

Next day the woodcutter, remembering the mendicant's advice, went farther into the forest and saw a sandal tree. He was very pleased. He collected as much sandal wood as he could carry and sold it for a good price. The following day he decided to go even farther on—for the mendicant had not said that he was to stop at the sandal tree—and came upon a copper mine. He collected as much of the copper as he could carry and sold it for a large sum of money.

The third day he did not stop at the copper mine. The mendicant had asked him to go ever farther on. He went farther on and came upon a silver mine. He collected as much silver as he could carry and sold it for a huge sum. Thus going farther and farther each day he came upon a gold mine and a diamond mine. Soon he became exceedingly rich. One must not stop at any point in one's quest for knowledge. One must go farther and farther on.

Why Not Go To The Source

During the reign of Akbar there was a fakir living in a forest near Delhi. Many people went to him every day for spiritual comfort. But he had nothing with which to feed these visitors. He decided to seek help from the Emperor. When he reached the royal court, Akbar was saying his prayers. He was saying : "Grant me, O Lord, more wealth, more power, more territories."

The fakir heard this and was sad. At the end of the prayers he wanted to go away but the king stopped him

"Holy man," he said "You came to see me. Why do you want to go away without informing me of the purpose of your visit?"

"O King," said the fakir, "people come to me every day to seek spiritual knowledge and I have nothing with which to feed them. I thought I would come and seek help from you."

"But you seem to have changed your mind?"

"I have," said the fakir. "I saw you yourself were in need of help. You were begging more wealth, more power and more territories from the Lord. Why should I then beg of a beggar? If one must beg it is better to beg the Lord."

Know Who You Are

Once a tigress, about to cub, attacked a flock of sheep. As she was pouncing on her prey she was delivered of a cub and then lay dead. The cub survived among the sheep. It grew up with the flock and learnt the ways of sheep. It nibbled at grass and imitated the bleating of the sheep. It never occurred to it to behave differently. One day, a tiger from the forest attacked the flock and killed a sheep. Then this tiger saw a tiger bleating and eating grass with the rest of the flock and chasing it into the jungle roared aloud and took it to a pond to see the reflection of the two of them in water.

"Look", it said to the sheepish tiger, "You are a tiger just like me. Why do you bleat like sheep and why are you frightened?" Then it offered it a piece of flesh to eat. Seeing it hesitate, it forced the meat into its mouth.

"Eat it," it ordered.

The sheepish tiger began to chew it and found that it tasted good. It asked for more and was soon devouring the kill.

The other tiger said, "Now you know that you and I are the same?"

"Yes", said the young tiger, now no longer sheepish, "My eyes are now opened. I know I am a

tiger". They both made for the jungle together.

Thus the guru shows the *chela* that they are both children of immortality.

Don't Hurt Others and Don't Let Others Hurt You

There was once a snake. It was very vicious. It bit everyone who came its way. Many people had died from its bite.

Once this snake saw a mahatma pass by. It ran after him. It raised its head to bite him. But the Mahatma's face was gentle and calm and it did not have the heart to bite him.

The Mahatma said; "Do you want to bite me, my friend?"

"I wanted to, but I will not," the snake replied.

"You should not bite anyone," the Mahatma advised.

"Very well," said the snake.

They parted.

From then on the snake changed its ways. It became very gentle. It bit no one. When people saw that the snake was harmless, they no longer cared for it. They began to tease it, poke at it and throw stones at it. They even dragged it by its tail. Its body became bruised and it was very weak.

Then one day the Mahatma passed again by the pit where the snake lived.

"What have you done to yourself, my friend?"

"People have done this to me because I do not

bite them now. You asked me not to bite anyone."

"Oh, my poor friend! I did say, 'Don't bite people' but I did not say, 'Don't hiss at people'."

Ignorance Leads to Fanaticism

Once there was a frog, living in a well. It was born in that well and had grown up there. One day it saw another frog jumping into the well.

"Where did you come from?" it asked the new-comer.

"I came from the sea," the latter answered.

"How big is the sea?"

"It is very big."

"Is it as big as this?" asked the frog of the well stretching apart its legs.

"Much bigger," answered the frog from the sea.

"Is it as big as this?" asked the frog of the well making a leap.

"It is much bigger."

"Is it as big as this well?"

"It is much bigger than your well."

"You are a liar," cried the frog of the well angrily. "There can be nothing bigger than this well. There is nothing beyond this well. I will have you thrown out."

This frog of the well lived in a small world of its own and would not admit anything that it could not conceive. It is such ignorant people who become fanatics.

Where Silence Says More Than Speech

A man had two sons. He sent them to a *guru* for study of the Vedas. When they returned after many years the father wanted to find out what they had learned. He called the elder son and asked him,

"Have you mastered the Vedas, my son?"

"Yes, father."

"Well, then, tell me what is the Brahman?"

"The Brahman, father, is beyond thought and speech; it pervades everything; it is this, it is that," said the young man, giving a long lecture on the subject and quoting many Vedantic texts.

"You have known the Brahman, have you? Indeed, you must be clear!" And he sent him about his business.

Then he called the younger son and asked him the same question.

"What is Brahman?"

The son had no answer to give. He remained silent.

The father said.

"I understand my son. You cannot make any statement about the Brahman. You know that by saying this or that of the Brahman you limit what is limitless. Your silence says more than many lectures."

Partial Knowledge

Four blind men wanted to know what an elephant was like. They were taken to one.

One felt with his hands one of the legs of the elephant and said: "I know now what an elephant is like. It is like a pillar."